

## WHITHER REGIONAL SECURITY IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN?

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Veteran Middle Eastern analyst and former Clinton administration official Martin Indyk recently characterized the Middle East as having been turned “upside down” in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to argue with his assessment. The Iraq invasion has unleashed wide-ranging forces that are re-ordering the internal and external dynamics of regional security and could plunge the region into a prolonged period of strategic insecurity.

The regional balance of power is being profoundly altered by the political empowerment of the Shia majority in Iraq, the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, and the accompanying loss of influence by Iraq’s Sunni community. Iraq no longer serves as the Sunni bulwark against Shia and Iranian expansion, and the Sunni Gulf monarchies (and Jordan) now find themselves front-line states against an emerging Iranian-dominated alliance comprising Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran’s seemingly inexorable march towards achieving a nuclear-weapons capability makes this alliance particularly disturbing to the Gulf states. In confronting these adversaries, the Sunni states also disturbingly find the region’s guarantor of security, the United States, in a weakened position. The limits of American military power on display in Iraq are combined with reduced political influence. This loss of influence is the cumulative result of policy choices made by the United States over the last six years.

Confronted by a series of conflicting messages from Washington that at various times emphasized democracy, transparency and human rights, and at other times demanded cooperation in the so-called war on terrorism, the region’s elites are now looking at alternative arrangements to deal with the regional insecurity emerging from the Iraq debacle and the rising power of Iran. Framed by the invasion of Iraq and the U.S. abandonment of constructive involvement in the Arab-Israeli dispute, these contradictory policies have combined to decimate public support for the United States throughout the region. The growth in anti-U.S. sentiment is an important underlying structural force pushing the region’s elites away from what had been a comfortable embrace with Washington.

While the *Iraq Study Group Report* constructively addressed many of the problems confronted by the United States in Iraq, it left largely untouched the more troubling longer-

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range strategic implications of the Iraq War. The Hudson Institute's Lt. Gen. William E. Odom (U.S. Army, ret.) has famously described the U.S. invasion of Iraq as "the greatest strategic disaster in United States history."<sup>2</sup> General Odom has gone so far as to predict a replay of the ignominious U.S. departure from Vietnam. In a piece posted on a website operated by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, Odom argued that television screens around the world will one day broadcast images of helicopters evacuating embattled U.S. personnel from the Green Zone in Baghdad, much as such personnel were unceremoniously airlifted off the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in April 1975.<sup>3</sup>

The decline of the U.S. position is altering a regional-security system that has preserved security and stability for the last decade.<sup>4</sup> The region's rush to reinvigorate dormant nuclear-power programs and to initiate new "peaceful" nuclear programs represents one element of this strategic realignment. In December 2006, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) announced plans to start construction of its own nuclear-power plants, and Russian President Vladimir Putin toured the region shortly thereafter, promising to assist the GCC states in building their own programs. In short, the region stands on the precipice of an era of strategic insecurity that may see the ignominious end of the regional-security architecture first constructed by the British early in the twentieth century and then embellished by the United States at the end of Gulf War I. I will review the development of the regional-security regime developed by the United States over a 20-year period and discuss its relevance in addressing the emerging and more unstable environment created as a result of the Iraq War.

## GENESIS OF THE ARCHITECTURE

At the end of World War I, the British confronted a series of paradoxes as they contemplated administering the spoils that victory in Europe had given them in the Middle East. At their feet lay all the former Ottoman dominions, stretching from Constantinople to Basra, and Baghdad, across the Levant and down into the Hijaz. Victory in Europe, however, had exacted its toll, and the British faced a series of problems in administering these areas and integrating them into the empire. The war had emptied the country's coffers, leaving it all but financially bankrupt; and the public clamored for a return home of the troops deployed in far-flung places like the Middle East — a force that might have served as an instrument of British influence and control in these domains. As colonial secretary, a politically rehabilitated Winston Churchill strove to construct a formula that would preserve Britain's position as the dominant regional power while simultaneously scaling back its level of commitment to meet domestic political and economic realities. All these issues confronted Churchill and his assembled experts during the Cairo Conference in March 1921, when he and his advisers made a series of decisions that are still affecting the course of history in the Middle East.

The best-known decision made in Cairo was the accommodation of Britain's Hashemite friends in the Hijaz that resulted in the creation of Jordan and Iraq. A less well-known issue was also vetted during the conference, where Churchill (becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1924-29 in his next cabinet job) became attracted to

the idea of using the Royal Air Force (RAF) to police the restive tribesmen throughout the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq in lieu of the expensive and manpower-intensive option of occupying these areas with British or Indian troops. Throughout the early part of the twentieth century and spurred by operations during World War I, the RAF had built a network of airfields that linked Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, Mesopotamia, Iran, Afghanistan and India. After the war under the proactive leadership of Air Marshall Sir Hugh Trenchard, the RAF consolidated the establishment of a series of airfields throughout the region in Aden, the Hijaz, Mesopotamia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Trucial Shaikdoms, Oman, Afghanistan, Peshawar and Iraq. By the late 1920s, after receiving administrative responsibility for the Iraq mandate, the RAF had assumed responsibility for internal and external security of Britain's interests throughout much of the Persian Gulf.<sup>5</sup> RAF operations proved their worth to the British in their successful internal policing actions in Iraq, Yemen, Kuwait, Trans-Jordan and Afghanistan during the interwar period. The RAF also helped beat back the marauding Saudi Ikhwan warriors during their raids into Kuwait, Trans-Jordan and Iraq in 1927-28.

The infrastructure developed by the RAF during this period proved invaluable during World War II, facilitating operations throughout the Middle East and the Allied resupply of 5 million tons of war matériel to the Soviet Union via Iran. Following World War II, the facilities infrastructure provided the basis for the British military presence until 1971, when they finally departed the region. Following the British departure, the United States gradually moved in to fill the vacuum created by the British withdrawal as the 1980s saw the Gulf increasingly become the most common destination for deploying U.S. Navy battle groups. During Operation Earnest Will in 1987, the United States signed on to the idea of using its navy to police the Gulf and escort oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. A whole generation of American naval officers effectively came of age in the Persian Gulf during the 1980s and 1990s. The navy's operational hub in the Gulf, in Manama, Bahrain, was inherited from the British and now administers a variety of activities devoted to maritime security and counterterrorism in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.<sup>6</sup> As the United States considers the consequences of its invasion of Iraq, the unanswered question is whether future generations of American naval officers will have the same career experience in the Gulf as those during the last 20 years.

## **PAST AS PROLOGUE**

It is easy to overdraw historical analogies in considering the current plight of the United States in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Just as Britain used the RAF to artificially extend the era of Pax Britannia in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, the United States now confronts a situation in which current circumstances in Iraq could represent the end of Pax Americana in the Gulf. The beginning of the era arguably dates to January 1980, when President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would use force to protect its interests in the region.<sup>7</sup> As the United States sorts through the strategic fallout of its misadventure in Iraq, it must contemplate the fate of Britain's almost 90-year-old template for maintaining regional security and stability that today still exists, albeit with the Stars and Stripes instead of the Union Jack fluttering in the hot desert breezes over military bases throughout the region.

### **Whither the Security Architecture?**

The decline of the U.S. global position and reduced U.S. influence throughout the Middle East may make it increasingly difficult for the United States to maintain its military facilities in the Persian Gulf. As regional elites are eventually forced to bow to the unfolding forces of political change and transition, they will inevitably be obliged to distance themselves from their erstwhile protectors — the U.S. military. As these leaders look across the landscape, they see a robust and maturing set of basing facilities that has grown significantly over the last 15 years. The American forward-deployed military presence in the Gulf has in the past served as an important instrument for preserving regional security and stability. At the end of Gulf War I, the United States took Britain's concept of linked military installations and added headquarters elements along with pre-positioned equipment to a variety of facilities in the Gulf. Enabled by a series of bilateral defense-cooperation agreements concluded between the United States and its regional partners, an overarching political and military framework emerged that has draped a U.S. security blanket over the Arabian Peninsula. Midway through the 1990s, the United States successfully prepositioned three heavy brigade sets of military equipment in the region to form the leading edge of a ground component that could be joined with air assets already in theater to counter conventional military threats to the peninsula. During the 1990s, the network of military facilities in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman allowed the United States to operationalize the sanctions-enforcement missions against Saddam. The infrastructure also represented the concrete manifestation of the security umbrella spread by the United States over the Sunni monarchies of the peninsula. By the end of the 1990s, the infrastructure comprised the following main components:

- Central Command Naval Component, or NAVCENT, in Manama, Bahrain
- Air Force Central Command Component, first at Eskan Village in Saudi Arabia before moving to Prince Sultan Air Base and then to Al Udeid in Qatar in August 2003
- Army Central Command Component, Kuwait
- Heavy Brigade sets of ground equipment in Qatar, Kuwait and afloat.
- Harvest Falcon Air Force equipment at Seeb in Oman
- Aerial refueling detachment at Al Dhafra in the UAE

During the late 1990s, the digital revolution's benefits began seeping into U.S. military operations throughout the world. Under the rubric of the so-called revolution in military affairs, digitized pictures of the land, sea and air environments were piped into American military bases and those of their coalition partners. The creation of common operating pictures helped create transparency and enhanced situational awareness among coalition militaries throughout the Gulf. By the time of Gulf War II, the network had added a veritable alphabet soup of new command elements, organizations and operational nodes:

- Combined Forces Command Afghanistan (CFC-A) in Kabul works with NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

- Combined Joint Task 76 directs combat operations throughout Afghanistan.
- Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa in Djibouti (CJTF-HOA) assists countries in the region to build indigenous counterterrorist capabilities.
- Combined Joint Task Force 150 - a coalition maritime naval operation commanded by a revolving series of multinational officers out of Manama, Bahrain — includes nine ships from seven countries performing maritime security in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.
- Combined Forces Air Component Command's Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid, Qatar, constitutes the Air Force Central Command's forward-deployed theater component.
- Central Command Forward Headquarters, (CENTCOM-CFC) Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar, is the leading edge of headquarters elements at Central Command's headquarters in MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- Central Command Special Operations Headquarters (SOCCENT), Qatar, coordinates special operations in-theater.
- Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I) oversees all combat operations in Iraq.
- Multi-National Security Training Command - Iraq (MNSTC-I) coordinates the program to train and equip Iraqi forces.
- NATO Training Mission - Iraq focuses on developing the Iraqi officer corps.
- Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), Kuwait, constitutes the Army's Central Command component that coordinates Army activity throughout the Central Command area of responsibility. CFLCC also maintains an area support group (ASG) at Camp As Sayliyah in Qatar.
- Central Command Deployment and Distribution Center (CDDOC), Kuwait, supports theater-wide logistics and information distribution.
- Information, surveillance and reconnaissance launch and recovery facility at Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates provides the Air Force Central Command Component with an operational and logistics hub to support theater-wide intelligence surveillance and collection with a variety of platforms.<sup>8</sup>

As was the case in Gulf War I, the infrastructure proved its usefulness once again in the buildup and prosecution of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The facilities provided the command elements to coordinate the flow of forces into the region in the buildup to Gulf War II. Once the invasion started, these facilities provided command and control to the operational forces and coordinated the flow of information and matériel in support of combat operations.

Today's Gulf military infrastructure needs to be seen within the context of a new scheme aimed at supporting forward operations throughout the arc of instability as spelled out in the Bush administration's *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. Released in March 2005, the report calls for a new global posture that features main operating bases (MOB) forward operating sites (FOS) and a "...diverse array of more austere cooperative security locations" (CSLs). These facilities are intended to be

linked and mutually supportive. MOBs like the facility at Al Udeid, for example, are well-developed with sufficient infrastructures to support large numbers of forces and to receive even larger numbers in times of crisis. FOSs are "...scalable, 'warm,' facilities intended for rotational use by operational forces. They often house prepositioned equipment and a modest permanent support presence. FOSs are able to support a range of military activities on short notice."<sup>9</sup> The new networked scheme of FOSs can be expected to spread out into the arc of instability from the MOBs in the Gulf.

Since the Iraq invasion in early 2003, the United States has been showering the region with military construction projects in order to prosecute ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan:

- In October 2004, as part of supplemental appropriations to fund ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Congress earmarked \$63 million in military construction funds for improvements at the Al Dhafra airfield in the UAE, which accommodated a U.S. Air Force aerial-refueling detachment during the 1990s and now hosts an information, surveillance and reconnaissance launch and recovery facility.

- The same bill contained \$60 million to fund additional enhancements to the Al Udeid airfield in Qatar.

- In Afghanistan, the United States is spending \$83 million to upgrade its two main bases: Bagram Air Base (north of Kabul) and Kandahar Air Field to the south.<sup>10</sup> The funding will be used to expand runways and other improvements and to provide new billeting facilities for U.S. military personnel.

- The expansion of the facilities infrastructure in Afghanistan has been mirrored in the development of facilities and solidified political-military partnerships in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup>

- In early 2006, Congress approved \$413.4 million for Army construction projects in Iraq and Afghanistan through 2010. The same bill funded \$36 million for Air Force construction projects in these countries.

- In Iraq, the United States has so far spent an estimated \$240 million on construction at the Balad Air Base (north of Baghdad), the main air transportation and supply hub; \$46.3 million at Al Asad, the largest military air center and major supply base for troops in Al Anbar; and \$121 million at Tallil Air Base (southern Iraq). Other projects include \$49.6 million for Camp Taji 20 miles northwest of Baghdad; \$165 million to build an Iraqi Army base near the southern town of Numaiy; and \$150 million for the Iraqi Army Al Kasik base north of Mosul.<sup>12</sup>

## **A POLITICAL-MILITARY DISCONNECT?**

The relevance of the new network of facilities in the Gulf and Central Asia to the regional political environment is at best questionable. At worst, it reflects a mismatch between the military capabilities being built and the regional environment in which the capabilities are meant to be used. The emerging facilities infrastructure is built on the premise that the United States needs to perform two basic military missions: (1) move large numbers of conventional forces into the region and (2) address regional contingen-

cies using forward-deployed forces on short notice with special-operations forces and weapons platforms capable of standoff precision strikes. It is unclear in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion whether the United States can realistically expect to perform either of these missions.

The growing American regional military footprint comes at a time when the political environment is increasingly hostile to the United States. As a result, the expanded footprint could prove unsustainable as regional elites continue to distance themselves from the United States. Some of the region's elites are better positioned to resist internal pressures than others. The Al Nahyans in the UAE, for example, face no serious opposition or internal political pressure to reduce their ties with the United States. Hence, the U.S. operation at Al Dhafra Air Base remains safe for the time being. But in Bahrain and Kuwait, changing internal political dynamics may force the regimes to start pressuring the United States to reduce its military footprint. The wild card and lynchpin for the regional base structure is Iraq, where the United States has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in new military facilities. Given what is an untenable long-term military situation, it appears inevitable that a phased U.S. withdrawal will come in the next several years, driven by both the Iraqis and public opinion in the United States. It is unclear whether any Iraqi government will acquiesce to a long-term foreign military presence in the new bases being built at Balad and elsewhere.

Moreover, the Bush administration's plans to achieve global military reach using forward-deployed forces operating from networks of bases appear mismatched to the region's threat environment, which is likely to be dominated by populist warlords and internal sectarian strife. The combat environment inside Iraq featuring insurgency and irregular warfare is trumpeted by various strategy documents as being the most likely type of combat environment facing the United States around the world. The experience of the U.S. military in Iraq is disheartening and provides a vivid testament to the limits of traditional military power. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the U.S. military remains institutionally predisposed against messy and costly ground wars like that which it is encountering in Iraq. Despite former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's attempts at "transformation," the American military departments remain wedded to "kinetic" operations that depend on ever more expensive strike platforms, but which are of limited use in insurgencies and constabulary operations.

## CONCLUSION

The aftermath of the Iraq invasion could represent a watershed for a military base structure that continues to be populated with more new staff and organizational structures. While the concrete jungle sprouting from the sands of the Persian Gulf might have made Sir Hugh Trenchard proud, it is not clear that the network of military facilities will be of much use in preserving regional security and stability. If Iraq proves to be a precursor to a prolonged period of strategic instability as new actors vie for political power throughout the region, the facilities infrastructure established by the British and passed on to the United States may prove to be a casualty of war. Such an environment suggests that externally applied military power via forward-based ground presence will decrease in



importance and may well become politically untenable for the regional elites. This does not mean that the United States will have no tools at its disposal to project military power and influence. The end result of the coming regional upheavals and the pressure this will place on the ground-based military means that the U.S. Navy may once again reign supreme, projecting power and influence on an episodic basis from the sea. Should such a scenario unfold, the next generation of U.S. naval officers can rest assured that their career paths will remain consistent with those of their forefathers and that carrier battle groups and expeditionary strike groups will continue to make their way to the Persian Gulf.

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Seymour Hersh, "The Redirection," *The New Yorker*, 83, No. 2 (2007), accessed online at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa\\_fact\\_hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh).

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Evan Lehman, "Retired General: Iraq Invasion Was a Strategic Disaster," *Lowell Sun*, September 30, 2005, accessed online at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article10488.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> William E. Odom, "Iraq Through the Prism of Vietnam," posted March 8, 2006, at <http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=background.view&backgroundid=0078>.

<sup>4</sup> For background on the main elements of the system of regional security and a summary of alternative frameworks, see Michael Kraig, "Forging a New Security Order for the Persian Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2006); James A. Russell, "Searching for a Post-Saddam Regional Security Architecture," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2004); Richard Russell, "The Collective Security Mirage," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2005); Kenneth Pollack, "Securing the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Authoritatively summarized in J.E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 13-57.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of current maritime security operations coordinated out of Bahrain, see James A. Russell, "Maritime Security in the Gulf: Addressing the Terrorist Threat," *Security and Terrorism Research Bulletin*, Vol. 2, (February 2006), pp. 9-11.

<sup>7</sup> As argued by Andrew Bacevich, "The Real World War IV," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 29 (Winter 2006), p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> List is derived from Statement of General John P. Abizaid, United States Arm Commander, United States Central Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the 2006 Posture of the United States Central Command, March 14, 2006. Al Dhafra detail is drawn from Department of Defense FY 2005 Supplemental Request for Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Unified Assistance February 2005 [http://www.dod.mil/comptroller/defbudget/fy2006/fy2005\\_supp.pdf](http://www.dod.mil/comptroller/defbudget/fy2006/fy2005_supp.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, March 2005, pp. 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> "U.S. Invests in Upgrades to Afghanistan Bases," Associated Press report, March 28, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Good treatment of the growing U.S. security partnerships in Central Asia is contained in Ilan Berman, "The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2004-05.

<sup>12</sup> Figures drawn from Becky Branford, "Iraq Bases Spur Questions Over US Plans," BBC News, March 30, 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4834032.stm>; Peter Spiegel, "Bush's Requests for Iraqi Bases Funding Make Some War of Extended Stay," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2006; Charles Hanley, "How Long Does the U.S. Plan to Stay in Iraq," *Associated Press*, March 20, 2006, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=1746987>. Also see Walter Posch, "Staying the Course: Permanent U.S. Bases in Iraq," *Middle East Policy* Vol. 13 (Fall 2006), pp. 109-120.